

*Every American who works hard should be able to fully share in the bounty of America
□ and so should their families. That is the bedrock belief of the Wisconsin La Follette
Progressive tradition
since the days of its founder, [Senator Robert La Follette](#) , and it is the belief that drives
Wisconsin's 7th District Congressman Dave Obey today.*

Growing up in Wisconsin□

Dave grew up in Wausau where he and his wife, Joan, went to St. James Catholic School. Both graduated from Wausau East High School and both went on to receive Bachelor's degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dave did his graduate work in Soviet politics



at the University of Wisconsin under a National Defense Education Act three-year scholarship and fully expected to be teaching Russian and Chinese politics before he took a turn toward public service.

The Roots of His Values

Dave's experiences while growing up have shaped his convictions and priorities in the work he does in Congress today.

Working in his father's floor covering business for a number of years, Dave sometimes worked with asbestos products. It was not until he began his service in the Congress that he discovered that asbestos caused cancer, although one of the manufacturers had known since 1939. That is one of the reasons why Dave fights for measures to protect worker health and safety and to give workers and neighborhoods the right to know what kind of dangerous chemicals and compounds they are being exposed to.

When Dave was very young, his father went to the hospital for an operation and came back with his arms paralyzed. "Nobody knew what caused it," Dave said. "But after a number of months, he slowly regained the use of his arms. We were scared. That experience taught me that working families are often just one paycheck away from economic disaster. And it showed me first-hand the importance of every family having access to good health care."

The month that Dave went away to Madison to finish his college education, his father lost his job at 3M Company (his father often worked at two jobs to make ends meet). "That scared me," Dave recalls, "because I had no idea how much help I would get from home in finishing my education. And that experience burned into me the conviction that access to education ought to be based on how much you are willing to learn and how hard you are willing to work, not on how many dollars your family has in their bank account."

During his college years, Dave worked summers at a local paper mill where he gained a healthy respect for how hard some people have to work in order to make a decent living for their families.

He also witnessed some things that he vowed he would change if he ever had a chance. "I remember taking our 20-minute lunch breaks and sitting on the steps on the back porch at the plant and seeing these huge pipes pour this junk into the Wisconsin River," Dave recalled. "I vowed at the time that if I ever had the chance to do anything to make industry stop using our rivers and streams as liquid dumps I would do it, and we have made some great progress through the years."

“I also remember that every time I visited my grandmother, who lived on Third Avenue in Wausau, we had to take a rag and wipe off the chairs and the porch swing because they were covered with dust and grime from the junk that was coming out of the smokestack at 3M Company. Today, that doesn't happen anymore, and I am proud to have been able to play at least a small role in bringing that progress about.”

State Legislative Experience

The same year that Dave married Joan Lepinski, he ran for the State Legislature and won. He served three full terms in the Wisconsin State Assembly, representing Marathon County, rising to the position of Assistant Democratic Leader. He played a key role in creating Wisconsin's modern system of Technical College Districts, for which he won national recognition, and in establishing the state's network of public broadcasting stations. He also was an early sponsor of Wisconsin's pioneering Homestead Tax Relief Act for senior citizens and served on the state commission that established Wisconsin's first Medicaid law.

U.S. House of Representatives

When Dave began his service in the Congress - succeeding Mel Laird, who was appointed Secretary of Defense - he was the youngest Member of Congress in the United States.

Long Record of Reform

Dave has become a leading spokesman for political and congressional reform.

As a junior Member of the House, he threw his support behind efforts to open committee hearings to the public (when Dave first went to Congress, many of those public hearings were held behind closed doors). In addition, Dave sponsored and pushed through rules changes which required powerful Appropriations Subcommittee Chairs to be voted on by the full Caucus rather than simply becoming Chairman, in order to make certain that they were not arbitrary or

out of touch.

He was appointed by the House Speaker to chair a commission which wrote a new Code of Ethics for the House, under which more than 20 Members have been disciplined. Under the Obey reforms, for the first time, Members of Congress were required to provide meaningful disclosure of their financial affairs in order to alert the public to any potential conflicts of interest. Those reforms also placed severe limits on what Members of Congress could make on the side moonlighting, again in order to minimize conflicts of interest. Up until that time, a number of Members had earned more than \$100,000 a year practicing law on the side - even sometimes representing lobbyists as clients!

His reforms also ended the ability of Members of Congress to put campaign fund surpluses into their own pockets when they retired.

Dave's support for reform is undiminished today.

Committee Assignments

Dave is the only Democratic Member of the House to have served on the three major economic committees in the Congress:

The Budget Committee, on which his six-year service included chairing the Task Force on Worker Productivity.

The Joint Economic Committee, which conducts long-term analysis of trends in the economy. Dave served two terms as Chair of the Committee. During that time, he and Senator Paul Sarbanes co-edited a book, *The Changing American Economy*, which was a result of a Committee-sponsored symposium on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the passage of the Full Employment Act of 1946.

The Committee on Appropriations, which makes funding decisions on every discretionary program in the federal budget. Dave is the Chairman of the Committee. In that capacity, he serves as a member of all twelve Appropriations Subcommittees, listed below:

- Agriculture, Rural Development, Food & Drug Admin. and Related Agencies
- Defense
- Energy and Water Development
- Financial Services and General Government
- Homeland Security
- Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
- Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
- Legislative Branch
- Military Construction, Veterans Administration, and Related Agencies
- Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
- State, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies
- Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies

As Chairman, Dave serves as the spokesman for the House of Representatives on appropriations issues.

Dave has established good working relationships and strong personal friendships with his Republican counterparts on the Committee, including the senior Republican, Jerry Lewis. "I have an obligation to fight and to fight hard for what I believe in and for the progressive principles that we are supposed to defend," Dave stated. "But that doesn't mean that you have to dislike people you disagree with and it doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to have bipartisan friendships in this place. Life's too short to have it any other way."

Priorities

Education is a key priority for Dave, and he is one of the two House leaders strengthening federal investments in education. Dave believes our children deserve to be taught in smaller classes by well-trained teachers in safe, modern buildings. He also believes that every student willing to work should be able to get a college education.

A second priority is **health care**. Dave has been a driving force behind doubling federal investments in medical research and in expanding access to affordable health care. He believes every American should be covered by affordable health insurance, that managed care patients need a Bill of Rights, and that Medicare should provide affordable prescription drug coverage for seniors.

Dave fought tirelessly for years against unsound policies that created **exploding deficits** in the 1980's.

Dave believes in **affordable tax cuts fairly distributed to all taxpayers**. But he opposes tax cuts needlessly paid for with borrowed dollars, especially if the lion's share of those tax cuts are targeted to the most well-off one percent of Americans - who need help the least. Tax cuts for the most well-off that are financed by borrowing money from Social Security and Medicare are irresponsible. They cripple our efforts to bring down the national debt and stop us from making key investments in education and science to keep the economy strong. They also foolishly guarantee that we won't have the money to keep Social Security and Medicare strong.

Dave also believes passionately that **agriculture policy should help family dairy farmers**, rather than large corporate farm operations. Dave has worked tirelessly to reform the outmoded milk marketing order policy and to provide supplemental payments to dairy farmers who have been hard hit by collapsing milk prices.

A protégé and disciple of Wisconsin's U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day, Dave also has a strong **commitment to the environment**. He has been at the forefront of efforts to prevent anti-environmental riders threatening our air, water, and resources from being attached to appropriations bills. Recently, a Midwestern environmental leader said of his efforts, "Without Dave Obey, the anti-environmental forces in Congress would be riding roughshod over our public lands, and clean air and water protections. He has been the guardian at the environmental gate."

Dave has been a key leader in **responding to the events of September 11**. Within a week after the attack, Dave and Congressman Bill Young (R-FL) pushed through the House a bipartisan \$40 billion emergency response package. He followed that up with action to increase investments above the President's request in **homeland security** activities to provide greater security:

- on our borders, in our ports, and in rail and air transportation;
- in securing the safety of our food supply;
- in mounting an aggressive effort to help local public health agencies to be better prepared against the possibility of chemical or biological attacks;
- and by increasing the resources available to modernize the FBI computer system and to increase the ability of intelligence in the law enforcement agencies to better communicate with one another.

Personal Interests

Dave enjoys playing the harmonica and performs with his two sons and some friends in a bluegrass band, "The Capitol Offenses," which has recorded three albums.

Related Links

- [Working on Your Behalf](#)
- [Awards and Recognitions](#)
- [Dave's Role on the Appropriations Committee](#)
- [Appropriations Committee FAQs](#)
- [Short Biography for Introductions](#)